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To Wash a Book and to Burn the Beard – Conceptualizing Art History as a Readymade in Huang Yong Ping’s Artworks

Throughout the 1980s, Huang Yong Ping frequently employed Western art history as a readymade. While these appropriations began with the copying of Jules Bastien-Lepage’s

“Haymakers” in Huang Yong Ping’s 1983 collage, “Haymakers (Les Foines)” by Jules Bastien-Lepage was exhibited in Shanghai in April 1978, by 1986 they fully destroyed the referenced Western works.

He burnt photocopies of portraits of Picasso and da Vinci, washed Herbert Read’s “A Concise History of Modern Painting” in a washing machine until it was just a pile of pulp, and presented slides of Western masterpieces instead of his own work at the 1988 Huangshan Conference in preparation for the seminal 1989 China/Avant-Garde exhibition. In his writings, he began to ask “what is art history?” At the time, there were few exhibitions of foreign art in major Chinese cities – Beijing and Shanghai – let alone the small coastal town of Xiamen where Huang Yong Ping was living. His exposure to foreign art was predominantly viewed through photographic reproductions in books and magazines. From this context, his theorization of art history as something reproduced – or at least reproducible through (photographic) documentation – seems hardly revolutionary. However, the methodological proposition suggested in these works and writings – to consider art history itself as a readymade – is. These writings and artworks connect art practices in China to global art history by resisting and often destroying the hegemonic narrative of global discourses of art history, or rather the reproduction of these discourses. By focusing on destroying the media that allow art historical discourses to circulate internationally, Huang Yong Ping’s appropriations begin to question the relationship between global art history and local art practices in China. They presciently deconstruct a history written elsewhere that excludes Chinese modern and contemporary art.

More importantly, however, the works foreground art history as medially constituted and thus point to the possibility of thinking art history as a readymade. If art history is considered as medially constituted what alternative relationships between global art and local practices emerge? In so far is this a useful methodology? Additionally, how do Huang Yong Ping’s destructive appropriations of art history suggest a reconsideration of institutional critique, especially considered within the specific context of 1980s China, which did not have a Western-styled gallery, museum or art market system? By analyzing Huang Yong Ping’s destructive appropriations of art history, this paper will argue that as Chinese artists critically deconstructed received narratives and Western and global art history, they proposed new methodologies for situating local art practices.

## Situating Global Art

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